An evaluation of the leadership challenges posed by the introduction of 'Mantle of the Expert' as a learning and teaching approach

Introduction

This assignment relates to the introduction of the inquiry-based 'Mantle of the Expert' (MoE) approach in a school of around 220 children, from Reception to Year 3. The school enjoys a varied catchment area, with children working at a range of ability levels. However, there is a higher than average proportion working beyond national expectations in all core subjects.

In their last inspection, OFSTED (2004) recognised the very good leadership, management and teaching at the school. It also acknowledged the steps that had already been taken to develop an imaginative approach which "ensures that the required curriculum is covered but that is supported very well by other purposeful and productive activities, particularly those related to the Arts" (p.15).

The school's relative success is underpinned by a system of distributed leadership. There is a strong Senior Management Team (comprising of 5 staff); all teachers, with the exception of NQTs, have curriculum responsibilities and the School Improvement and Development Plan (SIDP) is co-constructed by all classroom-based staff. The

prevailing ethos is one that values sharing, reflective practice and professional development.

At the beginning of the project, some staff had prior experience of action research and the school was involved in the Norfolk Thinking Schools Project. Colleagues contributed to, and learned from, the practices of other local schools, receiving some additional input from nationally-recognised speakers. Philosophy for Children, itself an inquiry-based approach, had been adopted by many staff.

For most of the project's life, my role in introducing MoE has been as a lead teacher, working collaboratively with a senior management colleague holding the role of project leader. At the beginning of the work, my position as a dedicated classroom teacher helped me to appreciate the day-to-day realities of learning about and using the approach, while still having an influence on the project's direction. However, as a classroom-based Acting Deputy Head since January, I have been able to develop a better appreciation of the leadership issues involved while continuing to develop my pedagogy.

Our project has involved sustained commitment. Whole-school work has been ongoing since the initial action plan was set in motion in Summer 2005 but preparatory discussions began in Autumn 2004. The introduction of MoE in school and the subsequent dialogue between staff, pupils and parents has led us to re-evaluate the way we approach certain fundamentals, like curriculum, continuity and assessment.

This assignment is structured to hopefully maintain a balance between explanation and analysis. I will begin by summarising the MoE approach and drawing out elements of commonality with the current national education agenda. I believe a summary is necessary as many of the leadership challenges can only be appreciated by understanding the approach and how it differs from usual classroom practice. In addition, possessing an appreciation of its relationship to the national agenda should help the reader to understand why MoE seemed like a valid approach to pursue.

Next, I will explain how the project came to be conceived, why the time seemed ripe for internal change and how the school's culture and ethos supported this. I will then explain the foreseen and unforeseen challenges that were addressed. Where challenges remain, I will outline our current state of thinking and draw from theoretical sources that may guide our way.

I hope it will become clear through this work that, what began as a 2-week trial in parallel Year 2 classrooms, has had a significant impact on teaching and learning throughout the school. However, in so doing, it has raised a number of issues, some as yet unresolved.

MoE: a summary

MoE is a drama-based approach to teaching and learning, developed by Professor Dorothy Heathcote during her career spanning more than fifty years. The approach is founded on the belief that children learn best when they adopt a relationship with teaching and learning akin to that of an expert acquiring new knowledge, rather than that of a typical pupil. In the drama, they may assume the role of architects designing a safari lodge aimed at generating eco-tourism in a remote area of Kenya. Alternatively, they may become an action group, campaigning to stop a stretch of (imaginary) woodland being destroyed to make way for a building development.

The teacher helps children to put on a ‘mantle of expertise’ by constructing learning experiences with them which encourage the development of a knowledgeable stance, professional attitude, and a sense of personal responsibility (Edmiston, undated). Values are explored through scenarios that arise: do the children think that the wood should be protected in *any* circumstances? Would they think differently if they were to discover in the drama that it was being destroyed to make way for a new, state-of-the-art, teaching hospital? Drama conventions (as per Heathcote, 1980a) are used to co-construct these types of imaginary context, and such contexts become backdrops for the learning. It is made clear at the outset that the work is entirely invented, and yet authenticity is carefully safeguarded by skilled adult intervention.

On the face of it, fantasy seems to undermine the whole idea of authenticity, yet everyday experience suggests otherwise:

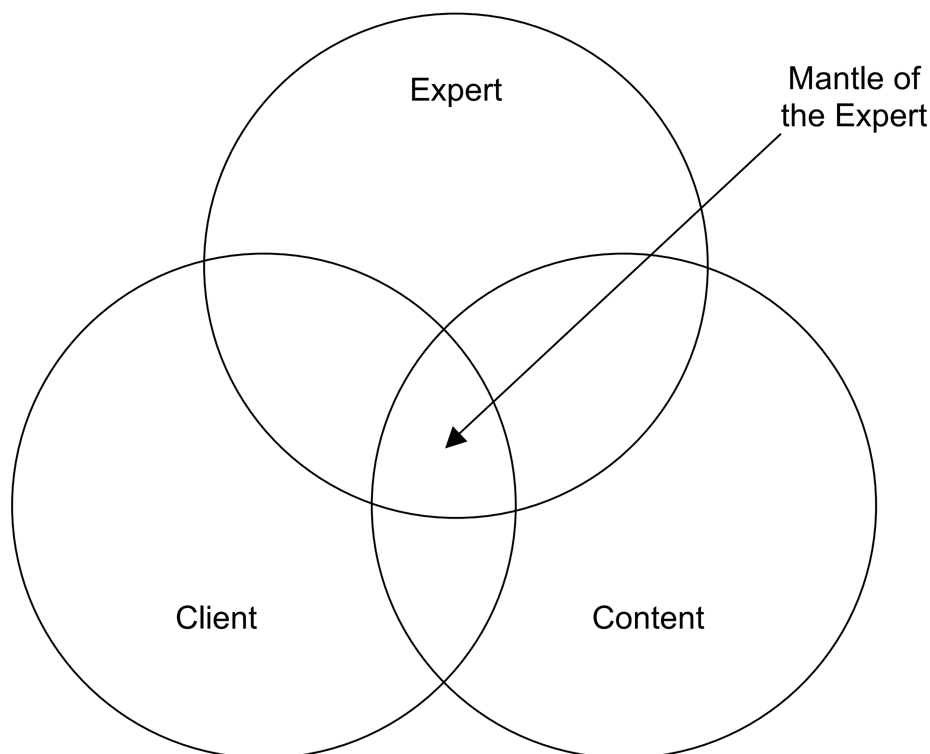
"When a significant event is coming up, we frequently rehearse it beforehand in our minds…We dramatize it, in short, and this dramatic act helps us explore the feel of the experience and thus decrease our anxiety and increase our control over it." (Wagner, 1999, p.4)

Rather than acting against authenticity, Wagner suggests that imagination is actually a useful tool for understanding and preparing for real situations. However, the aim of MoE is not to carry out a 'dummy run' for some far-off adult undertaking. It is to provide an authentic-feeling context where children are empowered to act *now*, knowing that their actions will affect the direction of future learning. This runs contrary to most work in the classroom. As Heathcote (1980b) observes:

"Most of the activities we ask children to participate in inside school buildings lack the urgent need to do them. All the activities tend to be introduced through teacher-power, with little to aid children to experience the urge to perform the tasks." (p.128)

The need to develop more authentic learning contexts has long been recognised (for example Dewey, 1913), and now the Specialist Schools and Academies Trust is adding the weight of its support (see Hargreaves 2006). However, finding an effective and manageable method of providing such contexts in the school environment has proved challenging. MoE might be an answer, as it uses the dramatic imagination to tackle authentic scenarios that could not be explored in reality. At its heart, it is a community-based approach where much of the work is

collaborative and socially shared, features that it has in common with a range of other successful learning programmes (Resnick, 1989). It places learning at the intersection of three distinct communities: those of the expert, client and content.



Expert Community

Children utilise, transform and develop their expertise by running an imaginary enterprise[1]. While in the real world they would not possess the full range of abilities necessary to do this, in an imaginary setting they can be 'scaffolded' by adult support. They are able to build upon their existing knowledge and skills through the process of doing, gradually taking greater control of their day-to-day work as their expertise grows, similar to the way an apprentice does. The teacher's aim is to go from where the children 'are at' and incrementally build on their existing understanding, in line

[1] 'Enterprise' is defined in its broadest sense. See Appendix 1 for an extensive list of examples.

with the profile of excellent learning and teaching defined by the ‘Excellence and Enjoyment’ document (DfES, 2003)

A range of factors is considered when selecting an enterprise, including the available opportunities for addressing parts of the curriculum. A Key Stage 2 teacher aiming to take a historical point of view may, for example, form an exhibition design company which specialises in creating interactive museum displays (see Taylor, undated).

However, while a subject like history may be the predominant focus, Mantle of the Expert always becomes an approach to the whole curriculum (Heathcote and Bolton, 1995). As Heathcote makes clear, “Any one thing *must* become meshed within broad curriculum knowledge and skills” (p.16). This echoes the reality of many people’s day-to-day lives. Situations are not tackled by considering the subject area to which they belong, but by drawing upon the knowledge and skills needed to confront them, regardless of the circumstances in which these were acquired.

A further consideration in enterprise selection would be the opportunities to learn about people: their actions, motives, values and relationships. Funeral directors, anti-terrorist police officers and UN aid-workers’ jobs would look very different, but would all raise questions about the human condition. By speaking to issues that really matter to children: compassion, generosity, jealousy, even death; teachers can help to develop their emotional engagement with learning and cultivate ‘emotional literacy’ skills (Goleman, 1996). Recent government initiatives, such as Every Child Matters (HM Government, 2004) and Social and Emotional Aspects of Learning (DfES, 2005)

elevate the concept of emotional literacy, recognising its power as a means of stimulating individual and societal development.

Client Community

Every real world enterprise has a client, or clients, for whom it works. In MoE, the imagined client, selected by the teacher, fulfils several important functions. Firstly, it defines the mandatory elements of the work by commissioning the enterprise to carry out a job; like designing a safari lodge for a game reserve or transporting a dolphin from one aquarium to another. Secondly, it regulates quality. Whilst, in traditional classroom work, the teacher is the clear arbiter of standards, in MoE, the client (albeit imagined and of the teacher's choosing) becomes the audience for most work, providing feedback using a variety of devices including teacher-in-role, fax, e-mail and (staged) telephone call. This helps a subtle power shift to take place. Instead of using 'power *over* others', teachers can more frequently use 'power *with* others', positioning children with broadly equal power to themselves (Edmiston, 1998). Teachers can work alongside children, tackling problems that unite them in a common cause rather than distancing them from each other.

Content community

The commission from the client provides a route into curriculum content, helping to refine a broader learning focus. In Taylor's example cited above, the exhibition company was commissioned by the local museum service to design a visitor centre at Venta, the historical remains of an Iceni settlement. The children had a reason to learn about movers and settlers, as there was a pressing need to understand

Romans, their influence on British society at the time, and their role in the downfall of the Iceni, in order to adequately fulfill their commission.

In MoE, most work takes the form of tasks which, as well as being curriculum-related, are also organisational practices arising logically from doing the job. Letters are written when they are needed, measurements made, experiments conducted and research carried out. Children appear to become invested in their work because they understand why it needs to be done and, just as importantly, why it needs to be done now. While the teacher instigates many tasks, some result directly from children's ideas. The teacher, as the professional with curriculum knowledge, selects those ideas that can be channeled to ensure enjoyment, challenge and curriculum entitlement. At any one time, some ideas are being utilised whilst others are being stored, waiting for a coherent opportunity to link them to the learning.

Assessment for learning remains a key part of the process. Depending on the teacher's intentions, reflection may take place from within the imaginary world, or by stepping back into the 'real world'. Within the imaginary world, the children may, with adult guidance, be considering how they did against their own, or the client's success criteria. They may be self, peer or group assessing; coaching, supporting and sharing opinions with each other in the way that colleagues do in many successful adult organisations.

In the 'real world', children, distanced from the imaginary space they've inhabited, seem comfortable reflecting on their own thinking, particularly when identifying areas

for personal improvement; almost as if any risk of damage to pride had been removed. Heathcote in Robbins (1988) may be close to explaining drama's power to liberate in this way:

"in drama the complexity of living is removed temporarily into this protected bower so that children not only can learn it and explore it, but also enjoy it". (pp.1-2)

This whole process of stepping outside oneself to think about thinking, metacognition, is important to children's cognitive development (Kuhn and Dean, 2004). It is also one of three key components to 'personalised learning', the approach championed by a range of publications at the forefront of setting the national agenda for change (such as DfES 2006 and Sims 2006).

How the project came to be conceived

We first began to hear about the MoE approach late in the Autumn term of 2004, quite soon after OFSTED had visited. We had been informed of the forthcoming inspection late in the summer term, so our collective focus had been on this impending event for around 12 weeks by the time the whole process had been completed. While the OFSTED team reported favourably, there was a noticeable vacuum left in their wake. Collectively, we felt that we needed to re-focus back onto learning and teaching, addressing some of their points for improvement but also continuing to develop the strengths they had identified.

My colleague Jenny in Year 2, who later became project leader, attended a Norfolk Thinking Schools event where MoE was featured. She relayed her experiences to the staff soon after that, at a meeting devoted to professional development feedback. While we only received a brief summary, most of us could see how the work would build on our attempts to induct the children into emotionally affective and increasing authentic learning experiences.

An opportunity arose as a result of the event for two members of our staff to become involved in a research project funded by the DfES Innovations Unit, entitled ‘Building Communities of Imaginative Inquiry’ (for full report, see Taylor, 2006). It aimed to interest teachers from local primary schools in the approach and develop a teacher-training model to support new practitioners. A research group of twelve teachers from seven schools was established and the training consisted of four residential weekends, interspersed with informal twilight meetings

In the Spring term of 2005, having discussed it further with our head teacher, Jenny and I trialed MoE in our classroom over a 2 week period. We soon found that it was invaluable to be working as year group colleagues, where we could plan and reflect together on similar work with children of similar abilities. The trial had many imperfections, but we saw the children approach their work with more commitment, ownership and personal responsibility than we’d ever seen. We fed our experiences back to the staff and a management decision was taken to find ways of developing the approach (see action plan in appendix 2) throughout the school. The project was established with the aim of finding whether Mantle of the Expert could become a

whole school model. Every teacher would be expected to use the approach at some point.

Analysis: why did the idea take off?

When analysing exactly what led the school to pursue MoE in the way it did, some key leadership factors emerge.

Support for the 'trailblazer approach'

There was an obvious commitment on the part of the school to supporting small-group, trial innovation and an acceptance that a range of ideas could and should be pursued by different groups simultaneously.

This approach seems to offer two main benefits. Firstly, it accepts that people do not take to new ideas at the same rate. Ryan and Gross's famous diffusion study (cited in Gladwell, 2000), found that only a tiny group of farmers (which they dubbed the 'Innovators') was willing to trial an improved strain of hybrid corn in the first few years. However, after some initial success, the rate of take-up accelerated, reaching truly epidemic proportions until all but the most conservative of farmers were exploiting it. The point is that step-together innovation may risk alienating the majority of people who take time to accept and embrace change, whereas small groups of trail-blazers can 'road-test' and feed back about ideas, allowing more reluctant colleagues time to come to terms with them.

Secondly, small groups can explore a wide range of ideas with relative speed. The fact that these ideas may be radically different from each other might actually prove helpful from a leadership perspective. Surowiecki (2004) identifies two clear steps in finding the best solution to a need: uncovering possible alternatives, then choosing between them. He asserts that decision-making systems need to encourage and support speculative ideas from diverse sources in order to eventually find the best options. He cites the consolidation of internet shopping as an example: in his view, the best offerings have won through, even though their success was not predicted by many. This inspires the possibility that the best idea may be the most speculative and come from the most unlikely source. Without a mechanism for valuing and trialing these ideas, the ideal solution may never be known, let alone exploited.

Belief in the value of 'communities of practice'

'Communities of practice', as defined by Lave and Wenger (1991), are "groups of people who share a concern or a passion for something they do and learn how to do it better as they interact regularly." The school's leadership team had to commit to the value of intra- and inter-school communities of practice for this innovation to move forward. No one person could have introduced this innovation but even two or three school staff would have struggled without the benefit of external support and expertise.

Confidence, security and flexibility

The leadership team showed confidence in Jenny's opinion when it mattered. When Jenny suggested that the MoE approach might work in school, they were secure enough in their practice to support change. Furthermore, they were flexible enough to reprioritise existing plans and seize upon a new idea, exploiting a colleague's passion rather than diluting it with inaction. If they had decided to wait until next year's SIDP was written, perhaps this spark of enthusiasm would have been extinguished.

The anticipated leadership challenges

Whole-school involvement

The first real leadership challenge arose when all teachers were expected to plan their own MoE sessions into the next half term's work; many were in need of support and reassurance. I think this was understandable, as it was the first time that a commitment had been required from everyone; until then, people had tried the approach on a purely voluntary basis. Our head teacher made it clear that, while 'having a go' was expected, this could be just one lesson, and that no one was anticipating perfection. To support the planning process, Jenny arranged for Tim Taylor, an Advanced Skills Teacher with MoE expertise, to attend two twilight sessions. He, Jenny and I worked with groups of staff and answered any questions that arose as potential ideas were considered and developed.

Looking back, Jenny and I had a very limited understanding of MoE ourselves and were not in a position to provide authoritative planning advice. However, I think that the sessions were successful. Tim was available to field any questions beyond our grasp, but people seemed keener to work with us, their in-house colleagues. I'm sure familiarity was a factor, but I also think that it was partly because we were not authorities on the subject. Perhaps the MoE theory, whilst ideologically compatible, seemed out of reach to begin with. What people needed was support from someone just a little further along the road to themselves, working at a level which seemed more easily attainable.

Developing drama skills

For a number of years, drama had formed a regular part of the school's INSET programme. However, factors, including retirement, staff movement and maternity leave meant that recent training had been somewhat limited and that levels of experience differed significantly between members of staff. It was also becoming clear that, because MoE required a more flexible, ad-hoc and widespread use of drama, we required a greater breadth and depth of knowledge. Two staff meetings were devoted to these aims and seemed to be successful. However, there were limiting factors. Firstly, the INSET meetings took place after school (as is typical) and, due to funding restraints, only involved teachers. As a result, support colleagues were not able to access the training. Secondly, while the sessions were practical, they did not involve children. There is an inherent difference between learning in a supportive adult environment and applying in a classroom setting.

The action-planning process sought to address these shortcomings. All teaching staff had opportunities to see children participating in a MoE session led by me or Jenny. Furthermore, key support staff attended a MoE conference alongside their teaching colleagues.

Parental involvement

A key issue for us was how to involve parents and how to gather feedback from them. The school received an 'excellent' grading from OFSTED (2004) for its parent partnership and it was important to us that they were kept involved in any new developments. Initially, the school's monthly newsletter was used to inform them that learning might look a little different in the classroom and that children may mention some seemingly odd goings-on. What we found was that parents became more intrigued as their children became enthused. As more parents began to ask about MoE, Jenny and I planned an extended schools event, enabling them to learn about it for themselves. We were mindful that the thought of drama might alienate, so we advertised and arranged in a sensitive manner. What was interesting was that, while a relatively small group of parents took part, many others got to learn more about the approach through word-of-mouth, something we only learnt later.

Unanticipated leadership challenges

Curriculum organisation

At the beginning of the project, most of the curriculum for each year group was organised through QCA schemes of work. These units were a basis for how foundation subjects were taught in school, to a greater or lesser extent depending on

individual teachers' styles. However, even for the most divergent of teachers, they dictated what themes were addressed, and when.

Looking back at the situation from a leadership point-of-view, I can see obvious benefits. Providing curriculum information to parents would have been straightforward; skills progression from year group to year group would have been addressed; and teaching resource requirements would have been fairly predictable.

However, what staff found, particularly Jenny and I who were using MoE more frequently, was that, if we were serious about becoming more inquiry-based, seeing what captured the children's imaginations and *really* pursuing their avenues of interest, this approach to curriculum organisation would no longer work. For example, at the outset of a 'Mantle', our intention might be to tackle certain QCA-type themes in a particular term, as per our curriculum map. However the children's interests and ideas may inadvertently lead the learning in a different direction or necessitate deeper engagement with just one theme. The possibility of this type of scenario made us question how the curriculum could be organised to ensure continuity and 'coverage', whilst still providing the flexibility to pursue children's lines of inquiry.

Coverage

The QCA schemes of work, by dividing the curriculum into manageable chunks, had made it relatively easy to provide the mandatory breadth of opportunities, albeit in a highly teacher-instigated way. As we became familiar with doing the same units at the same time each year, I think we were in danger of believing that the QCA units

actually were the curriculum. Since then, the leadership team have aimed to refocus everyone back onto what our National Curriculum requires of us. Some staff have found this more difficult than others, as the document is not quite as conveniently packaged as the QCA schemes of work.

The teachers using MoE regularly have been satisfied to find that all Key Skills listed at the front of the National Curriculum are being practised regularly. They have also realised through their growing experience that, by keeping a careful watch on the direction of the learning, they can identify elements of the programme of study that are not being reached and teach these discretely where necessary.

Timetabling has had to become more fluid and the leadership team has allowed each teacher to determine his or her own unique arrangements[2]. I, like many staff, didn't know until recently that there are no statutory times set down for each subject. As the 'Excellence and Enjoyment' document (DfES, 2003) makes clear, teachers and staff have the freedom to determine how to teach, which aspects of a subject to study in depth, how long to spend on each subject and how to arrange learning in the school day. This has been refreshing for me but for some, a little overwhelming. Most staff still choose to teach Maths and English discretely every morning.

[2] There are still certain non-negotiables, like P.E. slots, assemblies and break times!

Continuity

Having a static curriculum map has become increasingly impractical given the changes in organisation outlined above. It is clear that the school needs some way of ensuring progression and safeguarding against duplication. However, finding a suitable alternative to this static model has been difficult. At the time of writing, no adequate solution has been tested and implemented, but one possibility has been uncovered.

Through my NCSL 'Developing Leaders for Tomorrow' course, I learned about Wooranna Park Primary School in Melbourne, Australia. This school's inquiry-based approach to learning and teaching is supported by regular continuity meetings. In rotation, year groups share what is happening in their classrooms, making links with their curriculum's programme of study. The meetings allow subject co-ordinators and senior managers to map what the curriculum currently looks like in that year group. Over time, they are able to identify and address potential omissions and continuity issues. In this school, the curriculum map reflects, rather than determines, the learning experiences that happen. As of September 2007, we will be trialing this same approach.

Assessment

Most current assessment methods value individual performance while, in contrast, most MoE work is collaborative, with children working together in various groups at different times. The teachers using MoE in our school have found ways of reconciling

this, but it is becoming clear that most popular assessment methods undervalue group learning. When some groups of children collaborate, their collective ability appears to be greater than the sum of what each child brings to the group, yet an individualised system neglects this ‘group dividend’.

Through a MoE conference, we learnt about Mary James from the Institute of Education and her related work on ‘third generation assessment’. In her model, assessment is conceived as ‘assessing learning as building knowledge as part of doing things with others’ (James, undated). We are attracted as a school to such a model and Jenny is now involved in some action research with her class, exploring how it might work in practice. We can see that third generation assessment is compatible with assessment <u>for</u> learning, but what remains to be seen is whether it can develop into an approach which satisfies the assessment <u>of</u> learning agenda.

Evaluation: Has the project been successful?

Our initial aims of finding whether MoE could work throughout the school and getting each teacher to have a try, have been fulfilled. It has become clear through the project that MoE is not compatible with every teacher’s style. In our school, those staff that might fit Butler (2001)’s profile of the divergent thinker; the natural risk-takers, experimenters and discoverers; have found the approach more suited to them. Other colleagues of a more linear mindset have found it difficult, perhaps because the direction of learning, and hence the role of the teacher, becomes more unpredictable. Five out of eight classes are now regularly involved in MoE, and it has become a part

of many children's and parents' vocabulary. In addition, the feedback has been overwhelmingly positive (see appendix 3).

On an individual level, the project has been enormously valuable too. As a teacher using MoE, I have experienced great joy, and some frustration, but have finally found a way to be myself in the classroom. My relationships with the children are far more respectful now because I realise just what they're capable of achieving. I have also learnt that they are capable of using power responsibly and that, when their interests are exploited, they relish tackling big, difficult tasks.

From a leadership perspective, I've realised that introducing a new innovation can have many challenges and that it is difficult, if not impossible, to foresee all of these in advance. Hence, there is a need to be flexible and recognise that the unforeseen challenges might eventually lead to the most positive changes. Taking our school as an example, the two-week trial of MoE inadvertently led to a completely different, unforeseen, and arguably better, model of curriculum organisation.

In addition, I've learnt just how important it is for leaders to develop a culture and ethos that welcomes new ideas. I had the good fortune to help lead an innovation in a supportive and nurturing environment but it would be naïve of me to think that the school's culture and ethos had been trusted to luck. I am beginning to realise just how much the school's leaders, through the manifestation of their beliefs in action, have helped to shape it. Their actions have consistently reflected the values that

underpin the school's ethos and helped to 'infect' members of incumbent staff with similar expectations.

Finally, I've learnt through the project that a school's organisational structure needs to reflect the principles and practices of a school, not define them. Some colleagues from other schools talk about the constraints placed upon them by local and national government but, as Excellence and Enjoyment makes clear, schools have considerable latitude to shape their own destinies. If, like us, they want to create an environment where children's voices are at the centre of learning, no government body is going to stop them. On the contrary, the personalised learning agenda actually supports this aim (see DfES, 2006).

In essence, my experiences have led me to concur more strongly than ever with Professor George Betts: "Change the system, not the child. Let's do things with children, not to them."

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